

Selective Mutism

What is selective mutism?

- An essential feature of selective mutism is that in certain situations, the child speaks little or not at all, whereas in other situations the child is able to talk freely. The pattern is predictable and has persisted for at least a month (two months in a new setting e.g. school). **Children with selective mutism want to speak but have a fear/phobia of speaking aloud in certain situations.**
- Selective mutism is recognised as an anxiety disorder; this does not mean that the child is anxious all the time.
- The child with SM may withdraw more generally, and then fear other forms of communication as well, such as writing or pointing. May become **'frozen'** and find it difficult to indicate by pointing or other gestures. Eye contact and facial expressions may also decrease.
- **Shy vs selective mutism:**
 - Shy children may be slow to warm up but don't display the extreme fear of talking which characterises selective mutism. Children who are shy will gradually get used to new situations and environments and talking will come as they gain confidence with support and encouragement.
 - Shy children may develop selective mutism negative experiences or are pressured into talking before they are ready. Therefore, it is important that all shy children and reluctant talkers receive support and reassurance to settle in and participate at their own pace.

High and Low profile

- **High profile:** More obvious and easier to spot, the child is totally silent with certain people in certain situations.
- **Low profile:** The child may manage to speak a little when this is absolutely necessary, and the fear of disapproval outweighs the fear of talking. There is usually no spontaneous communication with adults, and communication is often short phrases to minimise talking. This profile of SM may therefore be missed by adults due to the less obvious presentation than a high profile.
- Both profiles there is a consistent pattern of speaking habits.

Dos and Don'ts

Do's	Don'ts
Recognise that selective mutism is an anxiety disorder; a phobia of talking which can only be overcome by allowing children to take small steps forward, in a controlled way, at their own pace. By removing speech anxiety in everyday situations, you will enable them to benefit fully from an intervention programme.	Be hurt or offended when the child remains silent.
Remember that this is a genuine difficulty and any pressure to speak will make things worse. Have patience and let the child speak when they are ready.	Beg, bribe, persuade or challenge the child to speak, or make it your mission to get them to talk.
Talk to the child about what you are doing without expecting an answer. Make comments rather than asking direct questions, e.g. 'This looks like your dog, I can't remember his name though', rather than 'What's the name of your dog?'	Make the child say 'Hello', 'Please', 'Thank you, etc. They are <i>not</i> being rude.
Provide the <i>opportunity</i> to speak rather than making demands, e.g. 'Hmm, I wonder where this one goes?' (pause); 'Oh dear, I can't find any round ones' (pause).	Ask direct questions which put the child on the spot, especially when other people are watching and waiting for an answer.
Warmly respond to the child's attempts to communicate through gesture or whispering, by talking back in a natural way as if they had spoken.	Look directly at the child when you are hoping that they might say something.
Ask the child questions through other adults or children they talk to, keeping a comfortable distance until the child can talk easily in front of you.	Penalise the child for not talking or tell them that they are talking too quietly.
Reassure the child in private that you won't single them out in class to answer a question, read aloud or demonstrate an activity unless they let you know that <i>they want to be chosen</i> . Say that they can start talking as soon as they feel ready but, until then, just have a good time! It's OK to laugh and it's OK to sing – whatever they feel they can manage.	React when the child finally talks. Simply carry on as if they have always spoken, responding positively to what they say, rather than the fact that they spoke. Later you can remark on how much fun you had, how good they are at reading, etc.
Try to find time at school for periods of unpressured one-to-one interaction.	Make the child repeat themselves in public if you don't hear (it's great that they are talking at all!). Do say in

	private, 'Sorry, I don't understand', or 'That was a great try but I'm sorry, I didn't hear', or 'Did you say X or Y?'
Organise activities in which children move, sing or talk <i>in unison</i> , and activities and games which do not require speech, making this clear before you start.	Spring surprises on the child; instead, prepare them for changes and transitions with photographs, visits and pictorial timetables.
Include the child in other activities by offering alternative forms of communication as a temporary stepping-stone while the child is having difficulty speaking; for example, pointing, holding up a picture, writing, or recording their news at home.	Dwell on what the child <i>can't</i> do. Discover their interests and talents and let them shine 😊

Dos and Don'ts taken from the selective mutism resource manual:

Johnson, M. and Wintgens, A. (2017) *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual*. London: Routledge

What can I do?

- **Talking to the child with selective mutism about their speech anxiety.** This should be done in a relaxed and open way, ensuring the child can feel confident that that things don't move on too quickly for them or feel pressured.
- **Confidence building:** as selective mutism is an anxiety disorder it is important that the child's emotional well-being and resilience is also supported as well as their communication.
- **Building rapport:** This can be done by putting the child at ease through 'commentary-style talk'. This involves talking to the child without asking direct questions, adult does all the talking leaving pauses (not looking expectantly at the child), making chatty comments, using rhetorical questions that do not require an answer.
- Using **alternate forms of communication** for example, writing, drawing, gestures, pictures.

References:

- Johnson, M. and Wintgens, A. (2017) *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual*. London: Routledge
- *Selective Mutism Information & Research Association (SMIRA) (2024)* SMIRA. Available at: [Selective Mutism Information & Research Association \(SMIRA\)](https://www.cpft.nhs.uk/speech-and-language-therapy-children) (Accessed: 22 September 2025)

- *Selective mutism – clinical information for slts* (2022) RCSLT. Available at: [Selective mutism – Clinical information for SLTs | RCSLT](#) (Accessed: 22 September 2025)